

PLOD ESSAY: Fire! Fire!

The headlines in *The Sentinel* showed that Messrs McKrimmon and O'Brien had an exciting week previous to the issue dated Friday January 19, 1912. The great outbreak of fire on Graham Street took over all of the columns in the paper – that is, after these editors first did their duty to report the State Mine V. Dalyston Cricket match, described in minute detail in column number one; and a meeting of the VCMA to discuss the 'Black Powder Troubles' in the mine in column number two. Report of a '**Disastrous Fire in Graham Street**', began in column number three and continued all through the next page.

In his history of the *Wonthaggi Fire Brigade 1910 to 1985*, Laurie Notley says:

"Sunday, 14th January 1912 saw one of the worst fires in the history of the town, which destroyed the Lyceum theatre, the Riflemen's Club, Waratah Boarding House (15 rooms), nine shops and damaged the *Sentinel* newspaper building. The damage extended from the present Union Theatre through to McKenzie Street."

The Sentinel reported it thus:

"What has long been expected occurred shortly after 3 pm on Sunday when more than half the buildings on the north side of Graham Street... were totally destroyed by fire and the remaining buildings narrowly escaped sharing the same fate. In this part of town as many as two or three shops were built on the same block. They were of temporary character, built close together and composed of material which was more adapted to spreading fire than stopping it....

"The fire started at the rear of the Lyceum Hall [a large wooden structure capable of seating over 700 people], and when first noticed had got a good hold of the building. The north wind was blowing strongly and in the right direction for the fire spread rapidly."

In 1912, the Wonthaggi Fire Brigade was still poorly equipped. It had been formed early in 1910 when the sudden establishment of tent

town to house 2000 men created the perfect situation for numerous tent fires. The first captain was Hawkes and he had 40 volunteers, 25 of whom were classed active, which meant they were available at all times.

The Country Fire Brigade Board recognised them in August 1910 and the Minister of Mines gave them £100 to put up a building [where the Masonic Hall is now] and buy equipment. They spent £50 on 500 ft of canvas hose, one hydrant,

two branches [or nozzles] and couplings.

By 1912 the Brigade Captain was Captain Day and the firemen had 2000 ft of canvas hose, three hydrants, six branches, two Y couplings, one hatchet, one fire hook, one galvanised bucket one kerosene lantern and six kerosene torches. They had one borrowed pump engine, which was an old manual and weighed a ton. On one occasion the firemen took off from the station on Church Hill, but the engine got away from them and finished up against the railway station!

The Fire Station

building was promptly moved to Watt Street. Even so the *Sentinel* reported that during the Graham Street fire, "The Fire Brigade was greatly hampered in its work by poor equipment... Captain Day put up a grand fight against overwhelming odds."

The *Powlett Express* reported that, "The firemen had great difficulty in pulling and pushing their hose reel through the mud to the scene of the fire, but they did good work once they arrived." Once in place, it took eight firemen to pump up and down on the bar along each side of the engine to get water through the hoses. But, the hoses, although fairly new, were not strong enough to handle the newly completed supply of reticulated water from Kongwak reservoir. It burst in a number of places.



One thing the Brigade had that worked was a new alarm bell and a system for ringing it when there was a fire: for North Wonthaggi there would be a rally and then four dongs; for South Dudley, three dongs; for East, two dongs; for West, one dong; but for the shopping area the ringing would be continuous. With the sound of the bell the brigade asked that owners of horses proceed expeditiously to the fire station to help firemen get the engine to the scene of the fire. While all other volunteers should run directly to the fire.

On Sunday the 14th, everyone ran to Graham Street. Laurie Notley wrote: "The day the fire occurred was very hot and Sunday School was in progress in the Methodist Hall. When the fire bell sounded the whole class stampeded through the door and up the lane to the side of the Church of England where the fire could be seen. I was one of those kids and remember the heat as well as an excellent view of the fire."

The Sunday School kids weren't the only ones to run out of their meeting. "It was a fortunate circumstance that the miners had just started to hold their meeting [about the powder troubles] and consequently a large number of willing workers was quickly on the scene to help the firemen."

Nothing the firemen did had any effect on the fire itself and the Lyceum Hall was soon a 'mountain of flames'. It was at once seen that the buildings in Graham Street would go as well and the miners were soon at work getting as much goods and furniture from them as they possibly could. The street was soon filled with all kinds of goods

"In less than a quarter of an hour from the start the flames had got a hold of the Riflemen's Club rooms, Mr Adams' tailor shop, Mrs Tomlinson's dressmaker shop, Mrs Jenkin's stationers shop, Mr Bowtel's boot shop and the residence of Mr Wisby, the biograph operator. The flames then travelled to the large boarding house known as the Waratah and from there to Messrs Abbott and Co's grocer shop and residence. Next to Abbott's was the *Sentinel* and it looked as if it was also doomed..."



Ruins after the fire at Graham Street, January 1912

But at that point the firemen prevailed and the flames were under control. Even though the flames had 'licked' the iron walls of the *Sentinel* building, the wind dropped and the fire fighters took their opportunity.

In the 'Local and General' column where the editor comments upon happenings of the town each week, Mr. McKrimmon wrote: "On Sunday last the *Sentinel* was just as close to being 'under' as we cared to be, and had it not been for the good services rendered by a host of friends and the members of the local fire brigade, we like others adjoining us would have been 'out of play'. Naturally, we are jubilant at being in a position to publish as usual today, and had it not been for the assistance rendered by Mr. A. B. Cranage of the *Powlett Express*, this would have been an impossibility... Very often opponents in business are the closest friends in the hour of adversity, and this week the *Express* has come to light in a manner which we are not likely to forget for many a day."

On page 3, Mr McKrimmon also thanked the fire fighters and the 'army' of miners, who worked like "Trojans from start to finish in their efforts to remove all that could be removed to a place of safety from the burning buildings". He couldn't believe how gallant the men were who removed everything of value from the *Sentinel* building, and then, an hour afterwards, returned it all to its original position in the office.

"How they removed our heavy machinery, we do not know," he wrote. "It was a Herculean task and just such a one as strong men could only be expected to perform... We cannot command words to sufficiently thank them."

- C. Landon